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5-1-2009

Review of Play, dir. by Alicia Scherson

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Recommended Citation

Roberts-Camps, T. (2009). Review of Play, dir. by Alicia Scherson. *Chasqui: Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana*, 38(1), 234–236.
<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cop-facarticles/478>

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Play. Dir. Alicia Scherson. Chile, 2005. Dur. 105 min.

Play (2005, winner “Best New Narrative Filmmaker” Tribeca Film Festival), a feature-length fictional film by Chilean director Alicia Scherson, follows a brief fragment in the lives of Cristina and Tristán. Cristina, from Southern Chile, is in Santiago working as a caregiver for a Hungarian man who requires a live-in nurse. She happens upon a briefcase in a dumpster and thus begins the connection between her life and that of Tristán, a young professional

from Las Condes, an upper-class neighborhood in Santiago, Chile. When Tristán's girlfriend Irene leaves him, he wanders the streets of the capital, getting mugged and robbed of his briefcase, which the thieves leave in a garbage bin. After discovering it, Cristina painstakingly organizes the contents of the case on her desk and listens to Tristán's music through his headphones while she also wanders the streets of her adopted city. Interestingly, the music we hear as the audience is the same music on the headphones and, when she removes them, the songs stop for us as well. There is one scene in particular that exemplifies this technique: when Cristina strikes up a conversation with the gardener they are both listening to headphones and as the camera's focus moves back and forth between the two characters, the music changes accordingly.

The title of Scherson's first feature-length film *Play* is symbolic of Cristina's voyeuristic entrance into Tristán's life. When she plays his music, she feels a part of his life and a part of upper-class Santiago. Cristina's boyfriend the gardener—a tamer version of Macabea's boyfriend in Clarice Lispector's novel *A hora da estrela* (1977) and Suzana Amaral's 1985 homonymous film—wants to move with her to the South and start a family. She shuns his idealistic image of Southern Chile and retorts that the outcome for them would be "hijos pobres." In fact, the theme of the contrast in socio-economic class surfaces throughout this film; Scherson highlights moments when the working-class Cristina follows Irene and watches her get dressed and put on make-up. Later, Cristina enters the elegantly decorated home and pretends to live there—she takes her shoes off and puts her bare feet on the coffee table, she undresses and walks through the house naked, she uses the toilet, and puts on the other woman's clothing and makeup. However, as is evident during her first and only conversation with Tristán, she knows that she cannot fit into this new life so easily. When Cristina finally decides to return the briefcase, she goes to his place of work to find him sprawled on the ground after possibly jumping from the building. In the hospital she stays with him until he awakes and it seems they might end up falling in love, yet when Tristán asks Cristina if she will be staying with him she sadly replies that she will not. She then goes to the front desk and gives the nurse Irene's phone number shortly after which the ex-girlfriend arrives. In the closing scene, the camera captures Cristina in a 360 degree pan on the roof of the hospital, whistling to the tune of the soundtrack.

The technique that Scherson employs in this film is surrealistic—occurrences that would seem out of the ordinary are presented in the narrative as everyday events and images of the characters' dreams appear throughout the film. There are two scenes that most notably exemplify this style: one in which Cristina launches a "Street Fighter II"-like fight with a woman in the street and another in which Tristán releases an insect from his mouth that had been there since the day before. The first scene mirrors the opening sequence in which Cristina is playing the video game "Street Fighter II." In it, the two women fight as we hear the sound effects and see the graphics on screen that imitate those of the video game. The second scene occurs when Tristán is speaking with his ex-girlfriend and she notes that he is acting oddly. He replies that he has had an insect in his mouth since the day before and promptly releases it from his mouth and it flies away.

Scherson's short film *Llorando debajo del agua* (2002) is also experimental in technique and, like *Play*, underscores the solitary moments of its characters. Similar to Raúl Ruiz's early, avant-garde work in Chile, Scherson's camera placement in this short film is non-traditional; the camera stays in one place and captures only the visible portion of the characters from its perspective. In both the feature-length and short films, characters read aloud from

books and philosophize on uncomfortable subjects. In *Llorando debajo del agua*, for example, we hear the ramblings of a pilot flying an airplane; he begins with phrases we would hear from any pilot about such things as turbulence but goes on to explain that despite appearances there is a lot of garbage in the air and tears fall faster at that altitude. These examples, along with a unique relationship between the soundtrack and action of her films, illustrate Scherson's refreshingly original and imaginative directorial style.

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